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Teaching Critical Listening

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By Margaret Arnold

We who are teachers of English are sometimes appalled when we stop to realize that the merchants of hundreds of products, ideas, and values can now pipe their messages into the majority of the homes in the country. Accordingly, we have concerned ourselves with ways of helping our students to build defenses against the misuse of the spoken word and have accepted as one of our major responsibilities the teaching of students to listen critically.

After assuming the responsibility, however, we sit back and wonder, "Where do we go from here?" The teaching of listening is a relatively new field, and much research remains to be done in it. Those who have worked in this area, however, can point out certain discoveries which can be of help to us (1). Evidence indicates, for example, that listening skill is not something one "picks up" automatically. People have to be taught to listen critically. Althea Bery, summing up the research on the subject, concludes, "Without instruction, there is little improvement in listening from junior high school through college" (2). Encouragingly, researchers do point out that when listening *is* taught directly, students do improve. In the area of critical listening, Oscar M. Haugh (3) experimented with three hundred students in a radio guidance program and discovered that the teaching of discrimination in this area brought about an improvement in the quality of programs selected.

Of course, when we try to make listening a practical part of our English curriculum, we inevitably come to the question, "Can

"They have ears, but they hear not." Mrs. Arnold, who teaches at Morton Township High School in Cicero, hopes to improve student's "hearing" by training their minds to screen out the misleading and the untrue.

it be measured or evaluated?" Certain standardized listening tests, the California Auding Tests and the Brown-Carlsen Listening Comprehension Test, are now available. It is also possible to construct informal instruments or to use tests of critical reading, given orally.

The teaching of critical listening is only a part of the whole area of listening, just as critical reading is but one of many reading skills. The listener, like the reader, learns to distinguish main ideas, follow the thread of a story, use context clues, etc. Although I am concentrating my discussion on the skill of critical listening, it is important to remember that there are also other vital listening skills to be developed. It is impossible to fit my discussion into neat categories because I am dealing with social aspects of language which defy exact classification. Arbitrarily, however, I am going to discuss various classroom procedures in the teaching of critical listening under these three areas: the qualities within a listener's own background which may affect his critical listening, the factors concerning the speaker and the speaking situation which may be influential, and the qualities in the content of the speech itself which require evaluation. The activities I am mentioning are not intended to be a "unit" for any particular class. They are merely suggestions which would have to be adapted to a specific group. Also, I would not suggest teaching activities such as these one after another. Listening is taught more realistically in connection with speaking.

Teaching Students to Discover the Qualities Within Their Backgrounds Which Affect Their Critical Listening (4)

Writers on listening have pointed out the significance of the listener's "hearing what he wants to hear" and carrying on a mental argument with the speaker instead of listening to and weighing the ideas presented. To the extent to which we can help students realize how much their prejudices influence their listening, we help them to evaluate a speaker's ideas more objectively. The filmstrip "Rumor Clinic," produced by the Anti-Defamation League, provides an excellent listening activity to accomplish this purpose. Before the filmstrip is shown, five students leave the room. A member of the class, who sees the filmstrip, then describes it to one of the five who has not seen it, who relays the description to the next, etc. The class compares the final version of the story with the original picture which is again flashed on the screen. In attempting to explain the differences between the report and the picture, one of the conclusions various classes have

drawn was, "We heard what we wanted to hear." Another means of pointing out the striking way the background of a listener can affect what he hears is to read aloud a speech on a controversial topic and have students take notes. The class can then compare notes and discuss the reasons people heard and jotted down different items.

By dramatizing situations in which they assume different viewpoints, students can again realize the influence of various backgrounds upon listeners. A dramatized conversation between a girl and a storekeeper on the subject of credit, for example, can be discussed to discover the extent to which the background of the storekeeper influenced the way he heard and responded to the girl. A similar type of discussion can result from dividing the class into groups to listen to a given speech from various viewpoints. For an oration extolling the school's football team, for example, one-third of the class might imagine themselves members of the student body of a rival school, one-third members of the faculty, and one-third members of the team itself. In trying to figure out how someone else's background and position influence his listening, they become more aware of the fact that their backgrounds similarly influence them.

Teaching Students to Weigh the Effect of the Speaker, the Spoken Word, and the Speaking Situation Upon the Listener (5)

The Speaker

Since listening takes place in situations in which we either see the speaker or hear the tones of his voice, we are susceptible to influences while listening which might not trouble us if we were reading the same message. Students need to realize, for example, the extent to which the prestige of the speaker influences them. We can help them come to this realization by having them listen to statements such as these: First, Ted Williams says, "When I eat Spunks, I really feel like a champion. They're a swell cereal!" Next, John Jones says, "When I eat Spunks, I really feel like a champion. They're a swell cereal!" Students can then discuss which statement would impress them more. Some teachers have their students make check-lists on which they indicate the positive and negative things about a speaker which may influence their judgment one way or another.

Another factor to be considered by the critical listener is the particular point of view or bias of the speaker. One teacher builds this awareness by reading his class quotations on controversial

subjects and having them name the person or group who might have made the statement. He had an opportunity to correct faulty thinking when 43% of his students considered the maker of a friendly, mildly critical comment about the United States to be a Communist or "pink." Within the class's speech activities it is possible to have someone who feels strongly about a subject argue the side opposing his own belief. This can be compared with his presentation of the side he favors. The students can discuss how, within their own group, a speaker's personal convictions affect the speech he is delivering. The study of radio news commentators is also a valuable exercise to illustrate the results of a speaker's point of view. Students can compare several news reporters' versions of the same story or try to see how the sponsor of a program may influence what is presented. Why, for example, does a commentator sponsored by an oil company say, "To preserve our democratic way of life, we must keep the government out of business"?

The Speaking Situation

As well as considering the speaker himself, students need to become aware of the particular power of the spoken word. Unlike the writer, the speaker is able to use inflections, phrasing, and pausing to put across his ideas. Student listeners need especially to become aware of sarcasm, irony, and ridicule in the oral presentation. To discover how important inflections are in conveying such impressions, they can practice saying a statement such as "X is a good school," with a variety of meanings to be guessed by their classmates. The use of irony in expression can be conveyed by the oral reading of a statement such as this:

> The score was 24-0 as the big game ended, and the high school had lost the most crucial contest of the season. "Gee, what a success!" commented Mack Smith, the captain.

Dramatized or recorded conversations are useful here, too. For example, a conversation in which one girl compliments another's dress as if she is really jealous gives the class practice detecting insincerity of statement from the tones and inflections used. To learn the effects of vocal pauses, students can practice reading such statements as:

> Woman without her man would be a savage.
> Woman! Without her, man would be a savage.

Another significant factor affecting the listener in the audience situation is the presence of other listeners around him. Students can become aware of the influence the crowd has upon them by

discussing the feeling they have of being part of the group while cheering at games and pep assemblies. Records are also helpful in illustrating the effect of the crowd upon listening. Students who listen to patriotic songs, such as the "Marseillaise," can find in them appeals designed to weld the audience into a group. If the class is studying *Julius Caesar,* a recording of Mark Antony's speech provides a good example of some of the ways by which a crowd is incited into action. A record which makes its hearers feel as if they are part of a group is "The Kid's Last Fight," (Columbia, No. 4-40178, 45 r.p.m.). This can be played and discussed so that students recognize the power of the crowd feeling.

Teaching Students to Listen Critically to the Content of the Speech Itself (6)

Possible Semantic Pitfalls

In listening, even more than in reading, students need to be aware of "loaded words," abstract words, and other semantic problems. The critical reader can always look back and check his impressions; the listener generally hears the message only once and must detect any misuse of words immediately. One of the first tasks is the recognition of abstract words in speeches and advertisements. Before listening to abstractions, students may need to get the concept of different levels. It is possible to construct abstraction ladders and draw them on the board—from the dog, Spot, through animals in general, for example. To appreciate abstractions through hearing them used, a class could listen to an oral presentation of the following political speeches:

> Democracy is the concern of the individual citizen. It insists that he be given enough food to maintain his health, enough clothing to preserve his self-respect, enough wages to maintain a decent living standard. It insists that his children be educated. It maintains that his individual freedoms of expression and worship must be guaranteed, so long as his actions do not harm his fellow men. It seeks to guarantee him "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," but it insists that he share the responsibilities, too.

> Democracy is a glorious tradition in our great and mighty land. It implies first and foremost patriotism, that whole-hearted love for the magnificent traditions of our powerful nation. Prosperity is our eternal birthright. Justice and hope and faith are with us as we scan the horizons for threats to our democratic security. Democracy is a beautiful word, and we should reverence it as we reverence our church and home.

They can then discuss which candidate has made himself more specific. At another time, two recorded or dramatized arguments may be valuable. In the first, the speakers argue in abstract terms

the relative merits of some questions such as heredity versus environment. In the second they discuss a specific person, such as an immigrant, and consider the effects of his heredity and environment on him. Students can discuss these arguments from the standpoint of abstractions. Why, for example, do the speakers in the second argument seem to have more common ground?

Closely related to the detection of abstractions is the awareness that a word can shift in meaning. To help students to realize the varied meanings a word can take on, it is possible to read them several sentences using "is"—"Whatever is, is right," "He is not going," etc. They can, no doubt, think of other examples. In the realm of political speeches, the teacher can read them an example like this: "Everyone agrees that cooperation is a virtue; yet my opponents wish to curb monopolies, which are certainly examples of cooperation." They can readily see which word undergoes a shift in meaning and what effect the shift has on the whole sentence. A further topic for the discussion of shift in meaning is the Russian claim that they seek true "democracy."

Another semantic area which can bewilder the untrained listener is that of sensing the connotations in which words are used. A class would probably enjoy the old "I am firm. You are obstinate. He is pig-headed." They can discuss whether or not the behavior of the persons being described is actually very different and can consider the effects of the various wordings on the listener. Similarly, other paired statements, such as "The restaurant serves the finest quality ground beefsteak" and "The joint serves hamburger" can be considered. Students can discover connotations of words by taking an adjective such as "poor" and listing as many synonyms as possible, from "impecunious" to "strapped." Some of the words, naturally, have different "overtones" and suggest various usage levels. The social connotations of language are further clarified for students by having them listen to a program such as "Amos and Andy" in which words are used colloquially, and translate one speech into more formal language, telling what different connotations the new words have.

Very important in the days of modern radio advertising and political oratory is the ability of the listener to sense when words are being used with emotive connotations and when they are used more objectively in the language of report. Frequently, the comparison of a news reporter with a news analyst who interjects his own feelings into the broadcast will make this distinction

clear. Stuart Chase (7) gives this example of emotive and report treatments of the same subject. They could be read orally to a class:

> The Aryan Fatherland, which has nursed the souls of heroes, calls upon you for the supreme sacrifice . . . which will echo forever down the corridors of history.

> Every adult in the geographical area called Germany will receive not more than two loaves of bread per week for the next six months.

Some teachers read students lists of words in which such terms as "bureaucrat," "rabble-rouser," and "dictator" are used and have them make note of the terms to which they react emotionally. Another assignment to illustrate emotional "slanting" of presentations requires the class to be divided into groups of three. Each group chooses an event. One person describes it objectively; another uses words to slant his speech in favor of it; and the third uses loaded words to slant his presentation against it. The class listens to discover the emotive connotations of words being used. In an election year, of course, political speeches and the platforms of both parties can be analyzed from the semantic standpoint.

Sometimes the student listener would be able to distinguish statements of fact from statements of opinion by recognizing emotive and report language. There are times, however, when he might not be able to do so. Activities in which a class compares statements such as "He is bashful" and "He does not speak when girls are present" help them learn to make the distinction. A valuable listening experience for distinguishing fact from opinion is a program such as "Town Meeting of the Air." Students discover that some speakers back up their opinions with facts and are more convincing than those who merely voice an opinion.

Fallacies in Reasoning

Just as the critical thinker and reader need to be able to recognize certain common fallacies, the critical listener needs to be aware of them in the oral situation. One of the aspects of a speaker's reasoning which students need to understand is the hidden assumption upon which he bases the inferences he draws. By discussing statements such as "It is clear today. It will probably not rain tomorrow" or "The apple is green. It will make me sick," they can learn to look for assumptions. After some practice, students can listen to a conversation or discussion given

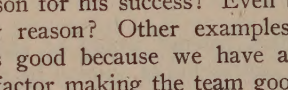
in class and try to figure out what speakers are assuming and why they make the statements they do.

Students can gain an understanding of the process of drawing inferences by making some of their own after a listening experience. An activity described by Cleveland Thomas (8) can be adapted to oral work. He had his students write papers in which they piled one inference after another on an original statement. One girl, for example, selected a poem by Thomas Hood and inferred that he had been a Communist. Such an exercise, given orally, provides valuable experience in listening for faulty inferences. It is also possible for students to learn to make inferences from radio listening experiences. Before a "Cavalcade of America" broadcast, for example, the teacher might ask the class to infer from the conversation and actions of the characters what pioneer traits were being represented.

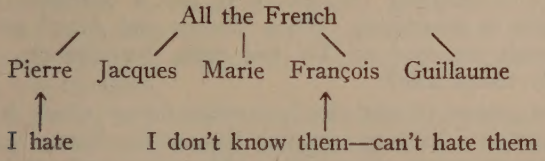
One of the many fallacies students need to be able to recognize is faulty cause-effect reasoning. They can be given oral examples and asked to detect and analyze the flaw. For instance: "I think my grandfather was successful because he didn't go to school after the eighth grade." Was Grandfather's lack of schooling the real reason for his success? Even though it was a factor, was it the only reason? Other examples might include, "Our football team is good because we have a good coach." Is the coach the only factor making the team good?

An aspect of faulty cause-effect reasoning is the "post hoc, ergo propter hoc" fallacy. Students can see it easily in superstitions: "We had a flat tire today because I walked under a ladder yesterday." Did my walking under the ladder cause the misfortune, or did it merely happen first? A mock political speech can also be used for analysis: "Lincoln should not have been elected president in 1860, since his election caused the Civil War shortly thereafter."

The hasty generalization—frequently one which is formed on an inadequate sample—is another common fallacy. Students can grasp the meaning of a statement such as "Ever since I have known Pierre, I have hated the French," especially if the reasoning involved is illustrated by a diagram:



We can contrast it with a sketch like this:



In another instance, students would be quick to see the injustice of such a statement as "John doesn't understand pronouns. He is a poor student." In the discussion, they would point out that all of the facts had not been considered. They can be led to object in a similar manner to generalizations about racial groups. Frequently, stereotypes result from inadequate generalizations. Some teachers have students write papers, either about a stereotype or an exception they have known. Students then begin to realize that individuals differ from the stereotyped picture. In a listening situation, this can be made an oral assignment. Another listening exercise for stereotypes is to have students tell jokes about someone from another country while the rest of the class tries to make sure that stereotypes are being avoided.

An additional argumentative fallacy is that of ignoring the question. A speech such as this can be read to bring it to the attention of a class:

> The argument I wish to support is that the student council should meet once a week. We don't have enough student get-togethers as it is. I favor more and better dances, more athletic events, and more plays.

The fallacy of "begging the question" might best be illustrated with an example from their experience. John says, for example, "I think Mary is beautiful because I like her, and I like her because she is beautiful." They can readily see that John is arguing in a circle. To see if they are listening critically, the teacher can bring up an example such as this during a literary discussion: "John Masefield is not a great poet, for there haven't been any great British poets for the last fifty years."

A rather deceptive device to be detected by the critical listener is the false analogy. A good illustration to initiate the concept could be drawn from a high school familiar to the students. The teacher can proceed to compare something incomparable between this school and their own, such as, "X High School publishes a school paper every week. We should be able to do it too." When the class points out that certain circumstances are different, they

are beginning to listen critically to analogies. An interesting activity in analyzing analogies is to pick a committee to study analogies in advertising. When "Before and After" pictures or statements are used on TV and radio, for example, are they actually comparable?

The misuse of statistics is another fallacy which is difficult to detect in a listening situation because the listener cannot go back and re-survey the numbers. The propaganda device "card-stacking" frequently demands that the listener give critical attention to statistical twisting. An activity which will arouse an argument is to have a girl in the class give a speech in which she quotes statistics to prove that more men than women are involved in auto accidents, concluding that, therefore, women are superior drivers. The boys in the class should have little trouble pointing out that there are more men drivers in the first place! The class can then discuss the need for making sure that statistics really prove what the speaker says they prove. Critical listeners also need to beware the misuse of statistics in advertising. A class can be alerted by a fake commercial such as this: "Yes, folks, what you've heard about the new scientific discoveries is true! Nine out of ten people have tooth decay! Safeguard your enamel. Use Glub Toothpaste." In the discussion, they can consider whether or not the statistics really prove the value of Glub. In outside-of-class listening, of course, they can look for similar examples. While considering statistics, it would be interesting to invite a math teacher to visit the class and to have him explain some of the elementary things to consider in listening to presentations of figures.

Another common fallacy to be avoided is either-or thinking, or the faulty dilemma. One teacher introduced this error to her students by having them list a number of opposites such as black and white, good and bad, etc. She then asked them to decide how many members of the class had dark hair and how many had light hair. They discovered that most were in-between. In the realm of politics, the 1896 election campaign affords a good example for discussion:

> There are but two sides to the conflict that is being waged. The one represents the wealthy and powerful classes who want control of the government to plunder the people. The other represents the people contending for equality before the law and the rights of man.

It is possible to make good use of the school's debate team to illustrate the problems of either-or thinking; perhaps the com-

parison of a short debate with a discussion on the same topic would be valuable. In the debate, the two extremes to the solution of a policy question are frequently presented; in a discussion, the members are in a position to arrive at a common ground between two extremes.

In the attempt to persuade a listener, speakers also may quote authorities. The "testimonial" propaganda device, for example, makes use of this practice. The student listener should be able, first of all, to assess the competence of the authority being quoted. A dramatized conversation, for example, in which Jim insists that something is right because "It's in the book," can lead to a discussion of the extent to which the text should be considered an authority. Other common authorities to be questioned by students are "they say," "a reliable source," and the more subtle passive, "it has been said." Students should discuss who the authority really is in statements such as these. To teach students to assess the reliability of an authority, John J. DeBoer (9) suggests comparing statements concerning rocket ships from a popular magazine and from the encyclopedia. He also recommends comparing a Hearst news release with a Department of Agriculture report. Students also need to realize that an expert is not an authority outside his own field. The teacher or a student can read an illustrative statement, such as one by Mario Lanza on the subject of atomic energy, to raise the question of the authority's competence.

It is also important for listeners to realize that the quotations they hear may be lifted out of context, although it is hard to judge this practice critically unless one is familiar with the speaker and/or the context. A class might consider an example such as this: "Suppose Mary has said, 'Mr. Jones didn't teach us anything all semester about Leonardo da Vinci.' A speaker quotes her, 'Mr. Jones didn't teach us anything all semester.' How would you realize that the speaker has quoted Mary in such a way that her meaning is twisted?" They can discuss such things as whether or not it seems reasonable for Mary to have made the statement. This sort of discussion is valuable for illustrating the idea that we must constantly check what we hear against our background of previous knowledge.

A final argumentative fallacy to be checked is inconsistency. A question such as this can be discussed: "Candidate 'A' says he wants to balance the budget and also expand the services of the government. Is there anything you would question about

his reasoning?" The class can also listen to advertisements for inconsistencies. For example, is it necessarily consistent to advertise the "highest quality at the lowest price?"

Propaganda Devices

As I have previously noted, several of the common propaganda devices have been included in my brief coverage of semantics and reasoning fallacies. Some of the most important have not been mentioned, however.

An important device of the propagandist is the selection of only certain items to give the listener a picture of just his side of the question. If the students live near a large city, they can discover the effect of this type of selection by comparing radio stations with different policies. In Chicago, for example, one station is operated by the Moody Bible Institute, one calls itself the "Voice of Labor," and one speaks for the "Prairie Farmer." It is interesting to have students listen to each of these stations for a specified length of time and make a list of the different subjects covered. They then begin to see the different emphases of the stations. Another valuable radio listening experience is to have students listen to a news broadcast and to list the areas of experience covered by the commentator. In a parallel column, they list the areas of experience which they feel the commentator has omitted. This sort of exercise helps them see that news is selected and gives them an opportunity to compare what they hear with their own experience.

Another propaganda device significant in influencing the listener is that of repetition. Students will be able to supply the last line after the teacher gives the first phrase of some familiar advertising slogans, such as "Super Suds . . .," "There's a Ford . . .," "L.S./ . . .," etc. They can discuss the effect of the repeated, rhythmical slogan in keeping the names of well-known products in their memories. It is interesting to examine with students some of the statements by Robert Lynd (10) of conflicting beliefs held by people. Most of these are in the form of familiar proverbs or sayings. The class can consider the extent to which the frequent repetition of these has influenced their acceptance of them.

One of the important devices on the list of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis is transfer. The propagandist frequently gives us a statement of true things which we accept, then adds his message, which may or may not be true, in the same package.

An easy example for students to analyze is "Do you want to be a popular he-man? Try Charlie's muscle-building course." Students quickly point out, when asked why the ad might sell the course, that most boys want to be "he-men." As a result, they connect Charlie's course with this desire even though there may be no logical connection. To help them see that mood-music on radio and TV can also bring about transfer, the teacher can play a recorded political oration, with and without a musical background. It is evident to the class, then, that the dignity of the music makes the speaker's words sound nobler. Record collectors in a class may like to experiment with different musical backgrounds to speeches.

The "plain folks" propaganda device should be particularly interesting to detect during an election year. The students can discuss such questions as "Why does the candidate want to tell us about his family and boyhood?" and can listen to radio and TV speeches for their "folksy" appeals. Advertisements also afford examples. When a man says he isn't an expert, but he likes a good smoke, for instance, students can learn to spot a "plain folks" appeal.

The final propaganda device not touched upon elsewhere in this article is the "band-wagon" appeal. Again, political speeches can be compared. It should be easy to find statements from both major parties indicating that the majority of the voters are behind them. Students can discuss what the effect on the voter might have been if only one of the major parties had made the claim. In the area of advertising, students can listen to examples such as this: "More people smoke Dromedaries than any other cigarette." The class can then be asked why they think this ad would make people want to buy Dromedaries. Discussion valuable for teen-agers can also be directed to the question, "Should a listener be influenced by a product or an idea simply because it is popular with everyone else?"

Critical Listening Activities in Which a Number of Different Skills Can Be Taught

There are a number of general exercises to which students can listen and apply a number of the techniques described above. One teacher, for example, makes use of round-robin activities in which one student makes a point while the following speakers develop a chain of proof for it. While this is being done, the class listens for argumentative flaws.

Numerous records can be used in listening experiences. The Gettysburg Address, for example, has been done by at least three different readers. Students can discuss the different ideas of the work which the varied emphases of the speakers give them.

Another writer gives his students as a speech topic "Good Propaganda," to encourage them to listen and to bring examples of the best. Of course, it is frequently possible to have them pick out the good points of an address by a visiting lecturer in the school.

The study of radio and TV advertising can be valuable in many ways. Students can compare, for example, the ads of high and low class programs—the ads associated with soap operas, for example, with those used on the Saturday afternoon "Met" performance. An interesting activity is to have them collect ads which disagree—both soaps and detergents are gentler on hands, for example. Students also enjoy making up their own ads and giving them to classmates to analyze.

Student listeners can learn to check a number of possible misinterpretations by asking intelligent questions. They can develop the habit, for example, of asking class speakers to identify the authorities they are quoting.

Panel discussions on controversial subjects, such as "Are Our Students Snobs?" give valuable experiences in listening critically. Students can also hold panels on the subjects of movie and TV drama. Part of the discussion can concern itself with the way in which these forms of entertainment can change attitudes. When we see a western, for example, what kind of person are we learning to admire?

Some classes draw up weekly "Hit Parades" of their favorite programs, news analysts, and advertisers.

Certain movies are also applicable to the subject of critical listening:

"Propaganda Technique," (Wm. C. Brink, collaborator) Coronet

"Film Tactics," Castle Films

"Do Words Ever Fool You?" Coronet

Before leaving the subject of critical listening, it would be good to consider carefully some of the results we might expect from developing this skill in our students. The teacher, first of all, would have to be careful that a succession of activities such as these did not build up attitudes of thoughtless skepticism toward all emotional language and all advertising. I would hope that discussions of emotional language would lead into the consideration of

legitimate emotional appeals in literature which are sometimes even more meaningful when read orally. A comparison of emotional language used by Adolph Hitler with that used by Patrick Henry can lead students to the understanding that the language itself is not to be condemned—it must be evaluated in relationship to the purpose of the speaker. A study of advertising, instead of leading to absolute disbelief of all claims, can make students aware of high quality advertising and of the services of Better Business Bureaus. Some studies could even result in letters of criticism to networks and sponsors. It seems to me that a potential outcome of this training of more critical listeners could very well be a rise in the standards of radio and TV broadcasting. Another even more vital outcome would be the equipping of the listener with the skills for hearing many ideas about government and weighing and choosing among them. In a nation in which all of us have this opportunity to make choices, our ability to select intelligently becomes vital. Wendell Johnson (12) has summed up quite eloquently the role that critical listening skill can play in making these selections:

> As the world grows more ominously voluble by the hour, the words we hurl at each other are no more confusing and maddening, or clarifying and calming, than our habits of listening permit them to be. Until they reach our ears they are mere sound waves. . . . It is through the alchemy of listening that they become transformed into the paralyzing and convulsant toxins of distrust and hate—or the beneficent portions of good will and intelligence.

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A Report on the Second Annual Conference of Illinois College English Teachers

The Conference of Illinois College English Teachers convened March 17, 1956, on the Urbana campus of the University of Illinois. Over thirty-five colleges in the state were represented, and the total individual registrations numbered 221, an increase of 43 over the attendance at the 1955 meeting.

The 1957 meeting will be held next spring at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, at a date to be announced later. It is hoped that college English departments in the state will give the Conference their support and that it will be possible to establish a tradition of annual meetings at which Illinois college English teachers can discuss mutual problems and exchange professional ideas.

The 1956 Conference at Urbana was concerned with the various approaches to the teaching of college English. The meet-

ing began with a general morning session in which three speakers discussed respectively the historical approach, the general humanities approach, and the new criticism approach to the teaching of literature. The afternoon sessions, which ran concurrently, dealt with more specific areas: the approaches to a Keats poem, the approaches to contemporary literature, and the approaches to freshman composition.

The Conference luncheon had as the principal speaker Professor Warner G. Rice, Chairman of the English Department at the University of Michigan. Professor Rice's topic was "The Man Who Saved Liberal Education," a light-hearted but somewhat acid attack on the business methods and automation which are rapidly overtaking education and which may end by leaving us little but kinefilms to satisfy our professional ambitions.

The recorders' reports which follow outline the principal points made in the general session and the panel discussions.

General Session—"Approaches to the Teaching of College English"

Presiding, Gordon N. Ray (University of Illinois)

"The Historical Approach"—Norman Weyand, S.J. (Loyola)

"The General Humanities Approach"—J. Hal Connor (Northern Illinois State)

"The New Criticism Approach"—Mentor Williams (Illinois Institute of Technology)

Recorder, A. Lynn Altenbernd (University of Illinois)

Professor Gordon N. Ray welcomed the Second Conference of Illinois College English Teachers on behalf of the University of Illinois. He reported that the registration at this year's conference totaled two hundred twenty-one as against one hundred seventy-eight at the first meeting a year ago. Next year's meeting will be held at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, with Professor W. B. Schneider, Chairman of the Department of English, representing the host school. Professor Ray, in introducing the three speakers for the general session, suggested that the term "approaches" need not imply "arrivals" at fixed conclusions.

Fr. Norman T. Weyand, S.J., Chairman of the Department of English at Loyola University, discussed the historical approach to the teaching of literature. Fr. Weyand began by emphasizing that while the humanistic approach appeals to him, he recognizes that we cannot concentrate on one approach to the exclusion of others, since we must teach literature as a whole. In a survey of the critical tendencies in the past several decades, Fr. Weyand showed that although the New Humanists of the early 30's,

led by Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, did react against the historical study of literature, they more strongly objected to the naturalistic tendency in American letters, and especially to the view of man as primarily material and animal. Hence it was possible for Edwin Greenlaw in *The Province of Literary History* (1931) to effect a just fusion of humanism and literary history. Similarly, the New Critics, who would emphasize primarily the study of the text, would approve explication based on accurate historical information. Fr. Weyand then demonstrated, through examples from Chaucer and Hopkins, that the necesary understanding of the intellectual matrix of a literary work must be derived from historical scholarship. He concluded that the literary historian must be, in addition, truly a humanist who teaches literature as a whole.

Professor J. Hal Connor of Northern Illinois State Teachers College opened his discussion of the general humanities approach to the teaching of English by suggesting that "approaches" may be merely a way of "milling around the subject at a safe distance," whereas the teacher of English cannot honestly escape the responsibility for teaching English. Professor Connor then surveyed the experiences of a number of colleges with various kinds of general humanities courses. An increasing number of schools have introduced (and have tended to retain and improve) courses stressing the fusion of the arts as parts of one stupendous whole. While recognizing such problems as the difficulty of providing an adequate staff for a general humanities course, and the possibility that many students lack the intellectual ability to profit from such instruction, Professor Connor suggested that the general humanities approach does make sense. Hence he might recommend an eight-semester-hour sequence centered on literature and offered by English departments. This sequence, required of English majors, and made optional for other students, should not be a substitute for freshman rhetoric. But if it avoided superficiality the general humanities course could be more valuable than surveys of literature as an introduction to our culture.

Professor Mentor Williams of the Illinois Institute of Technology, in discussing the New Criticism approach to literature, subtitled his remarks "Literary Methodism, or: Gimmicks Triumphant." Few dissent from the view that in the study of literature the desired end is the creation of men and women capable of reading literature with understanding and of assimilating the life, beauty, and meaning of literature into their own beings. Yet for the past sixty years the literary-study industry has been in hot pursuit of new methods, each of which tends to make the study of literature not a thing in itself, but a scapegoat for some other study. When the New Criticism invaded the classroom in the early 1930's, it became immediately popular because it was a militant reaction against the bad teaching of the 1920's. Brooks and Warren, in the preface to *Understanding Poetry* (1938), sought to introduce three principles for the teaching of literature: the literary work should be dealt with as a literary work; the treatment of literature should be concrete and inductive; the literary work should be seen as a total structure. Professor Williams noted the abuses of this approach and its vulnerability to satire. He concluded by urging that emphasis be placed on the teacher of literature rather than on a method of teaching literature, since humanistic values will be conveyed by a good teacher regardless of method.

A. Lynn Altenbernd

Conference I—Three Approaches to Keats' "Eve of St. Agnes"

Chairman, Robert L. Blair (Eastern Illinois State)
Discussion Leaders:
Milford C. Jochums (Illinois State Normal)
John F. Castle (Western Illinois State)
John S. Davenport (Knox College)

Recorder, James E. Robinson (University of Illinois)

Chairman Robert L. Blair of Eastern Illinois State placed the purpose of the "Eve of St. Agnes" meeting within the framework of the morning general session of the 1956 Conference of Illinois College English Teachers. The three approaches to the teaching of college English discussed in the general session were then applied specifically to Keats' poem.

Milford C. Jochums of Illinois State Normal explained first the purpose and value of the historical approach: to reach a judgment that can be objective and measurable by understanding the aesthetic purpose of a piece of literature within its function as a transcript of life. By examining some contributions of Keats' scholars, Mr. Jochums showed how "The Eve" gains in richness in the tapestry of the creative process that produced it. The literary sources of the poem, experiences in Keats' life that illuminate his purpose and mood, the physical sources available to Keats for the medieval detail, the manuscript stages of the poem's creation, the influences of associates that affected the poem's printed version—in short four decades of research into the poem's background by various scholars were surveyed by Mr. Jochums. He concluded by reviewing the interpretation of the poem offered by Earl Wasserman in *The Finer Tone* (1953): Wasserman views the poem as an exemplification of Keats' doctrine of the imagination as a medium to translate material experience into the spiritual, a doctrine seen in Keats' "Letter to Reynolds," the letter on the Mansion of Many Apartments, in which Keats metaphorically views life as a progression through a series of chambers, each leading man further from animal existence through pleasant wonders to a penetration of the mystery of life.

This interpretation by Wasserman, which focuses historical background on that which enlightens the intellectual structure of the poem, served as a good transition to an understanding of the general humanities approach to the poem as explained by John F. Castle of Western Illinois State. This approach, Mr. Castle demonstrated, attempts to place the work in the total culture of the epoch and thereby reach a judgment. The artist is the link between the professional philosopher and the man on the street: the artist articulates the prevailing attitudes of the epoch. Thus Mr. Castle reviewed some of the concepts and characteristics of romanticism, the prevailing cultural attitude in which "The Eve of St. Agnes" was created. Mr. Castle emphasized that the general humanities critic must then assume that the aesthetic experience of a work of art is direct—that Wagner must be heard and Turner seen (sensory aids in the classroom are then valuable), that however related a given piece of art is to other works of art of the epoch in other mediums, the greatness of a given work lies in itself. The poem itself must be studied; Keats' structure, content, etc. must be examined.

The latter focus becomes the entire focus of the new criticism approach, explained by John S. Davenport of Knox College. Mr. Davenport illustrated the approach by reviewing Wasserman's interpretation with non-new criticism elements omitted and certain procedures of analysis added. Mr. Davenport explained in detail how Keats uses diction, imagery, detail to dramatize and symbolize the poem's theme—the progress of Porphyro and Madeline to an ideal love: Porphyro progresses past the material world of the revelers to the scene of Madeline's spiritual world of the dream; moonlight and silver accentuate the ethereal; the food delicacies, the lute, the various details of sensuous appeal are climaxed by the sense experience of love, which in turn is transformed into the spiritual, ideal experience of the flight into the elfin night. The central theme portrayed in the story of Madeline and Porphyro is, Mr. Davenport further showed, flanked and emphasized by contrast with the minor characterizations, the ascetic beadsman who seeks truth without the beauty of human experience, the revelers who live in a sensuous world only.

Chairman Blair concluded the meeting by emphasizing how each speaker illustrated the synthesis, the core of meaning, and the judgment that are the aims of each approach of criticism. The meeting was adjourned in favor of coffee and informal discussion.

James E. Robinson, *Recorder*
University of Illinois

Conference II—Three Approaches to Contemporary Literature

Chairman, Eugene B. Vest (University of Illinois at Navy Pier)
Discussion Leaders:
Peter Veltman (Wheaton College)
Daniel Curley (University of Illinois)
Olive B. White (Bradley)
Recorder, Robert L. Schneider (University of Illinois)

As was advocated by the chairman, Mr. Vest, in his opening remarks, this meeting was made up largely of informal discussion. The three appointed speakers were brief, cogent, and direct, both in their talks and in their answers to questions subsequently addressed to them by the audience. Consequently, even though attendance at the meeting was excellent, a good proportion of the large audience ultimately participated actively.

Like the other two speakers, Mr. Veltman considered approaches to contemporary literature primarily as these are of value to the teacher. In his discussion of the merits and difficulties of the historical approach he pointed out that it has the virtue of enabling students to sense the continuity of life by explaining the past as well as the present, and that beginning with the life and times of an artist as they are related to his work utilizes the sound method of moving the student from the familiar to the unknown. The chief danger of this approach, for the teacher of contemporary literature, is excessive devotion to the present, which is extremely difficult to understand while it is the present. Furthermore, as

Mr. Veltman noted, the teacher has the hard task of distinguishing between the merely historical and the intrinsic significance of literature, a task for which the historical approach is inadequate.

A solution to this problem was suggested by Dean White, who talked of the uses of New Criticism, after first having summarized the faults which recent attacks on the method have emphasized. She pointed out that these faults—the air of mystery, the difficult vocabulary, and the rigid methodology—are natural products of the desire for consistency and the enthusiasm of protest against the incomplete, peripheral, and trivial in approaches to literature. The assets and achievements of New Criticism, she implied, outweigh its faults; it called attention to literature classes which were merely bad history, rejected the view that literature ought to be the slave of politics, recognized the unity and internal consistency of a good creative work, and made the student—and the teacher—look at the work itself, as something worth studying for its own sake. Her attitude, however, was not that of a crusader for one method; her defense was designed to combat the narrowly partisan opposition to New Criticism which is presently rather widespread. Dean White assumed that most of us realize the need to utilize as many approaches to literature as seem fruitful.

The views of a practicing writer were given by Mr. Curley, who is also a teacher, and whose being a writer provides him with an unarguable answer to the frequent student question, "How do you know the author meant all that you say he did?" Mr. Curley readily admitted that the conscious intentions of the artist might well provide no support for the critic's convictions about a work, but he added that his own experience, first as a writer and then as a teacher, had convinced him that the author may "mean" or "say" far more than he realizes. Moreover, because the critic's terms, methods, and aims are different from the artist's, biography may be of little value to the teacher of literature, although it is of great value to the teacher of writing.

Partly stimulated by the speakers, partly spontaneous, the discussion which followed included questions about such practical problems as the proper aims of courses in contemporary literature, the criteria which should govern selection of texts, the teaching methods which should be used, and even the definition of "contemporary" as applied to literature. As was appropriate to such a meeting, the discussion did not produce definite conclusions or unanimously accepted answers to the many questions that were considered. The meeting was nevertheless refreshingly free of the careful and diffident lack of apparent conviction which often blights academic discussion groups; disagreement was frequent and strong enough to keep the discussion lively and thus insure continued interest.

ROBERT SCHNEIDER

Conference III—Three Approaches to Freshman Composition

Chairman, Robert E. Streeter (University of Chicago)

Discussion Leaders:

Chenault Kelly (Eastern Illinois State)
Halbert E. Gulley (University of Illinois)
Frank B. Moake (Southern Illinois)

Recorder, Stewart C. Dodge (University of Illinois)

Chenault Kelly presented one phase of the statemental approach to sentence analysis. She distinguished between two schools of semanticists: "General Semanticists," following the precepts of Korzybski, and "Pure Semanticists," following the precepts of the Warsaw Circle (1919-1926) and preserved by Alfred Tarski in his book on the concept of truth. Aligning herself with the pure semanticists, Miss Kelly discussed the difference between the two schools with respect to the much talked about symbol-referent-confusion theme. She then recommended the following device for teachers of English to use in their daily lessons from elementary grades through college for establishing a feeling for the nature of symbols: In all lessons having to do with sentence or word analysis—situations, for example, where students are learning to spell words or divide them into their sound parts or are learning to identify sentence elements—students should be required to preface their references to words and sentences by the word *word* or the word *sentence;* that is to say, "The word *Mary* is the subject of the sentence," not "Mary is the subject of the sentence"; and "The word *incident* has two *i's* in it," not "Incident has two *i's* in it." Miss Kelly asked the question: "Where better than in an English rhetoric class can students be taught to use a metalanguage (language about a language) ?"

Halbert E. Gulley (University of Illinois) summarized the knowledge of ten years of teaching communications at the Universities of Iowa and Illinois. The object of these courses had been to integrate the disciplines of writing, reading (both speed and comprehension), speaking and listening. He conceived that the courses were aimed at teaching practical (as opposed to literary or creative) expression in order to make a better student and a better member of society. In these courses there was a frank attempt made to evaluate the progress of the student by means of similar tests in communications skills given at the beginning and at the end of the semester. After pre-test, students at Iowa were put into sectioins which emphasized correction of their own most obvious deficiencies, whether in writing or reading, in speaking or listening. In all courses a common problem was frequently studied and utilized in improving each of the four skills. Mr. Gulley's survey of the results indicated some learning: in reading, the Nelson-Denney test indicated an average increase (in terms of national norms) from the 70th to 90th percentile after two semesters; in listening, tests of local devising indicated 7 percent improvement at the end of one semester, 3 percent greater skill at the end of the second; speaking and writing, though subjectively judged, probably improved over the year course as much as they would have in a semester given independently to each. A locally devised objective test in writing indicated an improvement of 20 percent or more. Mr. Gulley concluded that there are three chief difficulties in the communications approach: (1) the necessarily versatile teachers are hard to find; (2) genuine integration of the four disciplines

is difficult to achieve; and (3) it is difficult to achieve in eight semester hours the equivalent of a six-hour course in composition and a three-hour course in speech, in addition to adequate instruction in reading and listening.

Frank B. Moake (Southern Illinois University), defending the traditional method of teaching rhetoric, defined the writing course as: "utilitarian," "practical,"—a "service course." The student should be taught to write *clearly* and *literately*, and to master writing as he would any skill, by constant practice and correction. He felt that any other core of content in the course would divert attention from this purpose. Accordingly, Mr. Moake pointed out weaknesses in methods other than traditional. The semantic approach may "take as a body of subject matter the language itself." The communications approach tries ambitiously to teach four skills rather than one; though Mr. Moake acknowledged that the four skills are related, he insisted upon the "primacy of writing" in a writing course. Mr. Moake concluded that he did not feel that any other method was an acceptable substitute for the traditional approach.

In the discussion period which followed the three *apologia*, it was pointed out that there is a difference between the "semantic" and "linguistic" disciplines. People who felt strongly about the semantics approach pointed out that rhetoric teachers, perhaps by definition, had to deal with language *per se*. It was also acknowledged that, in a given school, any or all approaches might have to be used. Finally, Mr. Gulley was asked what calibre of student was to be found in the communications course at the University of Illinois. He remarked that they were quite "normal"; however, only 10 percent took the course, whereas the other 90 percent entered the regulation rhetoric courses.

STEWART DODGE